



The Sign Above the Tunnel



What Does the Sign Say?

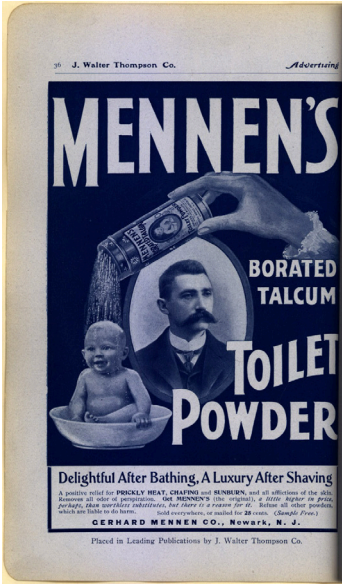
“Mennen’s Borated Talcum Toilet Powder”

The faded painting on the face of Maryland Heights was an early 1900s advertisement aimed at passengers on the B&O Railroad, which was a heavily traveled rail line.

Origins

From the establishment of the town in the 1700s through today, this landscape has been exploited for business. From her house on High Street in 1906, Clara Riley watched as sign painters created a huge advertisement, out of a milk and whitewash mixture, on the side of the mountain. Mrs. Riley remembered the year because she was in labor with her first child while the sign was being painted.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, painting advertisements on brick buildings and stone cliffs was very popular. Although the Mennen’s powder sign may have been the largest in the area, it was not alone (The wall around the famous John Brown Fort advertised liver pills). As transportation shifted to roads and automobiles, advertisements moved to billboards and highways.



Maintaining the Sign

In May of 1963, the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) attempted to hide the sign at the request of Park Superintendent Joseph Prentice. Prentice said that looking at the sign was “like looking across the Grand Canyon and seeing a Coca-Cola sign.”

The PATC and the superintendent were not the only ones who disliked the sign. Many local residents believed it to be a “desecration of nature.”

Eager to eradicate the sign, PATC volunteers scaled the cliff and attacked the old sign with paint remover and carbon black. However, only four years later the sign was visible once again and has since been left alone.

Much like John Brown, the sign has been a polarizing icon through the years. Some people want it removed because they feel it mars the natural view, and others wish to protect it because it is a historical artifact.

If you were to visit Harpers Ferry National Historical Park again in 40 years, what would you like to see on the mountainside? Should the sign be removed? Should the sign be allowed to fade away? Should the sign be repainted?